

The CIVIL WAR on the HIGH SEAS

BY HILARY PARKINSON



Craig L. Symonds

The Civil War is not usually considered in terms of its naval engagements, but Abraham Lincoln was a wartime President who used the resources at his disposal, including the Navy.

In *Lincoln and His Admirals*, Craig L. Symonds details the development of the relationship between Lincoln and his naval officers, Lincoln's growing interest in how the Navy could be used in concert with the Army during the war, and the technological advances that the Navy began to use during this time.

Symonds is the author of 12 other books focusing on military and naval history. He is professor emeritus at the United States Naval Academy, where he taught naval history and Civil War history for 30 years. His books have won the Baroness Lincoln Prize, the Daniel and Marilyn Laney Prize, the S.A. Cunningham Award, the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Prize, and the John Lyman Book Award three times. In 2009 he shared the \$50,000 Lincoln Prize with James M. McPherson.

You've written several books on the Civil War—what drew you to write about Lincoln and his admirals?

At some point, every Civil War scholar (or student) needs to come to grips with Lincoln. To me, using the prism of the Navy to do so was a natural choice. Back in 1952, T. Harry Williams published a thoughtful book entitled *Lincoln and His Generals*. Since then, a number of excellent writers have investigated Lincoln as commander-in-chief, but no one had dealt with his management of the Navy. Given that there have been some 16,000 books on Lincoln, and none on Lincoln's relationship with the Navy, it seemed a logical topic to pursue.

Historians seem to focus on the actions of the Army, and there are few books about the role of the Navy during the Civil War. Why do you think this area has been neglected by researchers?

Well, in all fairness, the Civil War was primarily a land war. The Navy's role was not insignificant, but neither was it decisive. In exploring questions like: How did the North win? (or how did the South lose?), the answer lies in the land war.

On the other hand, the Navy did help determine both the trajectory and the length of the war. Within the last decade or so, a number of scholars have turned to the naval war, including Michael Bennett, Ari Hoogenboom, Ivan Musicant, William H. Roberts, Stephen Taaffe, and Spencer Tucker. My own book, *The Civil War at Sea*, came out in November 2009. So if the naval war has been neglected, we are making up for it now.

The National Archives has many letters and telegrams from naval officers in Record Group 45. Were you familiar with these documents before starting the book? Did you make any unexpected discoveries in this record group?

I taught naval history at the Naval Academy for more than 30 years, and so I was very familiar with Record Group 45. The Naval

Academy has the complete microfilm set, and I not only used it myself, I also sent midshipmen to read the original documents. They would come back to me and say, "Professor, did you know you can read the actual letters they sent to each other?"

As for making new finds during this project, one thing that both surprised and enchanted me was the revelation of the relationship between Lincoln and Navy lieutenant Henry A. Wise. Lincoln saw that he would have to act as the adjudicator between the Army and the Navy during their turf battles in the Western Theater, and he used young Lieutenant Wise as a go-between. Wise's letter books in the National Archives, which are not microfilmed, reveal an interesting relationship in which Wise received telegraph messages at the Washington Navy Yard from Cairo, Illinois, then rode over to the White House to read them to Lincoln. Lincoln dictated his reply, and Wise went back to the Navy Yard to tell the on-scene commanders what to do. Without those letters, the degree of Lincoln's hands-on involvement would be unclear. I am greatly indebted to Rick Peuser at the National Archives, who helped me with this collection and others.

One of the themes of your book is Lincoln's development as commander-in-chief. In addition to a steep learning curve in military tactics, Lincoln also had to learn to manage the military officers. Which do you think was more challenging for him?

The officers. Lincoln did have a steep learning curve with regard to things military—he had no significant military experience. As he had with other things in his life (literature, the law, speechmaking), he taught himself as much about strategy and tactics as he could. Not because he sought to become a strategist or tactician, but in order to understand what it was his advisers and generals were telling him.

In the end, his strategic views were more instinctive than a product of study, and the same is true of his management of those high-ranking officers who were supposed to apply that strategy. His

greatest frustration was getting the officers to appreciate the need for cooperation on a continental scale: to ensure that armies moved in conformance with an overall plan rather than with regard only to their own logistical and tactical perceptions, or to get the Army and Navy to work together. The phrase was not in use then, but managing generals (and admirals, too) was rather like herding cats. Only Lincoln's famous patience allowed him to survive it.

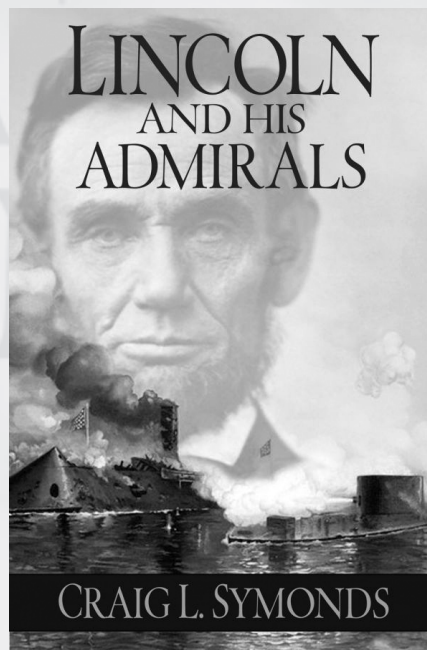
What was Lincoln's management style like with Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles and his assistant Gustavus V. Fox? Did it change over the span of the war?

Lincoln did not know Welles when he appointed him secretary of the Navy, an appointment made mainly for political and geographic balance in the cabinet. But Lincoln came to appreciate Welles's earnestness and loyalty. Welles had little subtlety or nuance: he tended to say just what he thought in plain language, and this made him enemies in the press and even within the cabinet. But Lincoln appreciated his candor, and Welles was one of only two men (Seward being the other) who remained in the cabinet throughout Lincoln's presidency. As for Fox, Lincoln liked him at once. Fox briefed Lincoln on a plan to resupply Fort Sumter in the first week of his presidency, and Lincoln put him in charge of the effort. Even though it failed, Lincoln was impressed throughout by Fox's energy and professionalism, and he created the post of assistant secretary of the Navy for Fox.

Lincoln seems to have been frustrated on several occasions by the reluctance of naval officers to be more aggressive in their campaigns. Why were the admirals so reluctant to engage—was it personality, leadership, or tradition?

Probably tradition. In the antebellum Navy, a ship commander's first responsibility was to his vessel. If he ran it aground or damaged it in bad weather, he could be sure that a court-martial would result, and the outcome of that might be disgrace and dismissal. Moreover, for half a millennium, ships fighting against forts was a fool's mission: forts always won (for one thing, they couldn't sink). So when Welles or Fox urged a squadron commander to attack a fort, or at least to run past it, there was instinctive reluctance by many officers to make the attempt. A few did it, and did so willingly—Farragut damming the torpedoes comes to mind—but they were the exception.

The naval campaign took place in rivers, harbors, and even the waters of the Caribbean. Were there any places where naval action occurred that surprised you while researching this book?



Not really, because I knew that the war extended into virtually every corner of the globe: the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the northern Pacific. There is a Civil War monument in Alaska! One curious example of the long reach of the Civil War is the visit of the Confederate raider *Shenandoah* to Melbourne, Australia. The Confederate cause was glamorized there, and scores of local men sought to enlist in the Confederate Navy. That would have been a violation of the Foreign Enlistment Act, however, so they hid out on board. Very likely the *Shenandoah's* commander was complicit in this stowing away, for it is hard to see how he could have been unaware of it. Still, once the *Shenandoah* was back at sea, scores of men came crawling out of the ship's hollow iron bowsprit to offer their service.

The Navy also saw the development and use of new technology in the fleet. Did Lincoln hinder or advance this naval technology, and do you think these advancements would have been made without the pressures of the Civil War?

Many of the most important technological developments that we associate with the Civil War were already well under way before the first shot was fired at Fort Sumter: steam propulsion, the screw propeller, heavy rifled guns, exploding ordnance shells—all these were already in place. The Civil War proved a testing ground and a proving ground for them, but they were coming even without the war. Other changes, especially mines (called torpedoes at the time), armored warships, and submarines, probably would not have emerged until later without the pressure of the Civil War. As for Lincoln, he was very interested in new technology. He actively supported the ironclad ships, and particularly Ericsson's rotating armored turret, as well as other inventions. He regularly visited the Washington Navy Yard in order to witness, or even participate in, the testing of some new device.

There were several diplomatic hiccups due to actions on the water. Did any of these incidents truly pose a threat that Lincoln might have to simultaneously go to war with a European power?

Yes and no. To be sure, several of these incidents, most notably the *Trent* affair in the winter of 1861, did pose a real threat—the English were genuinely prepared to go to war—but Lincoln knew that the United States simply could not survive a war with both the Confederacy and a European power at the same time. So while the threat was real, Lincoln's determination to avoid it made it unlikely that it would have happened. He compromised when he had to (as in the *Trent* affair), paid off complaining neutrals whose ships were seized by over-eager blockaders, and all in all, he did what he had to do to fight only one war at a time.